









NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF PERFUMERY

WHAT IS THE STATE OF AMERICAN PERFUMERY? I've been asking myself *ad infinitum*. I'll have my own business operating by the time you read this—so it's natural to wonder. I've realized I need to answer another question first: What is American perfume?





Let's seek answers here and, in doing so, reframe perfume's global history—beginning with a Babylonian tablet from 1200 BCE.




On it, we encounter Tapputi, history's first-recorded perfumer. She used solvents to capture the essences of rose, myrrh and more. Her innovations built on ancestral wisdom passed through generations before her, and they were passed along to generations that came after. In the 11th century, the Islamic philosopher Ibn Sina built upon her ideas with the distillation process






that we still use to make rosewater. Their cumulative knowledge eventually arrived in Venice via the Silk Road. The perfumer who Queen Elizabeth I hired to scent her gloves with civet and wildly infrequent baths with carnation was, in fact, Venetian.





History tells us modern, alcohol-based perfume isn't French, but Eastern European. *Hungary Water*, a cologne cut with brandy, dates to 1400 AD. Precisely how and when perfume arrived in France is still debated. Some credit Catherine de' Medici and the Florentine perfumer she employed when she married into the French crown. That's one theory. There are many.




What matters is perfume came to France and eventually became inseparable from French national identity. One story recalls King Louis XIV dousing guests in tuberose perfume—*SURPRISE!*—upon their arrival to court. Another remembers Marie Antoinette fleeing revolutionary Paris undetected








until her expensive Lubin perfume exposed her to an angry proletarian mob. The French everyman has perfume to thank, then, for Madame Déficit going out with a just *THWAAAACK—!*





To be clear, these stories may contain truths, especially sentimental ones. But they're state mythologies—French cousins to the United States' fabricated tale about George Washington and his cherry tree. It's no coincidence that France's second colonial empire peaked just as the nation's perfumery production boomed between the 1880s and the 1940s.



Over a year ago, I ordered a sample of solvent-extracted tuberose absolute, which I'd never smelled in isolation before. Back then, thinking of tuberose made me recall Piguet's *Fracas*, the high-femme, bombshell classic—like Marilyn Monroe in a bottle. I was surprised to learn raw tuberose absolute is flanked with a char reminiscent of smoky mezcal.




Eventually I would learn tuberose is an agave native to the Yucatán Peninsula. Aztecs cultivated it first. They flavored chocolate with it and used it to perfume their spaces and bodies. Then Hernán Cortés murdered Montezuma II and toppled Tenōchtitlán. Genocidal colonizers renamed the region New Spain, and Spanish friars, in need of manpower, invited French monks to assist them in their Catholic missionary conquest. In the 1530s, one of these monks ripped a handful of the Aztec tubers from that blood-soaked Yucatán soil, sailed home to France and planted them in his garden. Today, France leads the world's tuberose production.



Suddenly, the French king's tuberose *SURPRISE!* comes into sharper focus and appears darkly ritualistic, like a baptism in the blood of people his nation helped conquer. And the Aztec word for tuberose, *omixochitl*, couldn't be more fitting for the plant's history if it tried. In English, the word translates to "bone flower."



American independent perfumers from Canada to Chile, and anyone who appreciates our work and wishes us well:

 **We need to acknowledge perfume as a unit of cultural production with the demonstrable technological capability of reinforcing harmful state ideology.**

Whether perfume smells good matters. But feigning ignorance to what perfume as we know it *actually* is and insisting that dialogue about perfume should center idealized beauty only enables its most destructive modern function: *obfuscation*. Better we admit awareness of perfume's relation to blood diamonds than pretend we're a bunch of blind or ignorant players.

The good news is perfume itself *has no obligation* to reinforce the colonial imagination. So we can change course. But we have our own history to keep in mind. Many narratives



Coloniality

Supremacism

White
Supremacy

Slavery

Genocide

Cultural
Hegemony

Erasure of
Knowledge

Loss of
Collectivism

Patriarchy

Gendered
Violence

Invisible
Labour

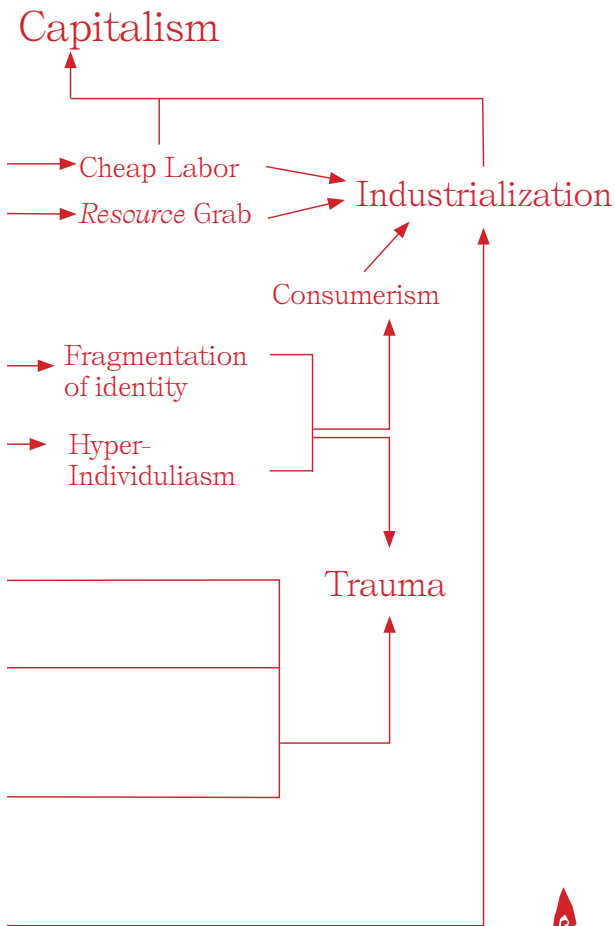
Anthro-
pocentrism



Ecocide

Extraction
of *Resources*




(Chart adapted from Dr.Rupa Marya's presentation at Bioneers, 2018)






about American perfumery begin in the 1950s with Estée Lauder's *Youth Dew*. Lauder herself pushed a narrative that implied it was the first American-produced perfume.





Put simply: Estée Lauder bent the truth. But the colonial function that her claim deployed worked. As recently as 2018, in the latest imprint of *Perfumes: The Guide*, the massively influential perfume critic Luca Turin reinforced it when he introduced American influence on global perfumery with the “great US perfumes of the fifties [...] best illustrated by [...] *Youth Dew*, still stunning in its novelty today.”



It's telling that he also writes, “It is a strange coincidence [...] that skin melanin is a polymer spontaneously formed from phenols, and that the perfumery materials that defined American perfumery were also in good part phenols” just before evoking *Youth Dew*.



Once again, what we have on





display here is modern perfumery's key, functional ability to reproduce colonial state mythology.



American perfumery was once *very* Black, in fact. It was led by people like Annie Turnbo and her student Madame CJ Walker, among the first Black women to become millionaires. Black immigrant-owned Verbena Perfume Company ran circles around its competition in 1920s Harlem. These are only three examples. You'll find more if you look to history—I promise.




Centuries before them, Aztec *omixochitl* cultivation and widespread indigenous implementation of copal, tobacco and other materials unique to the Americas demonstrate that a robust, pre-colonial scent culture existed here long before colonizers arrived.

Even those colonizers made perfume. Rhode Island chemist Caswell-Massey was founded in 1756, nearly fifty years before Marie Antoinette's






execution. *Florida Water*, released in 1808, had become a drugstore staple by 1830. In 1889, Guerlain released *Jicky*, the first perfume to implement synthetic vanillin. At the Universal Exhibition in Paris that same year, Ohio-born Theodore Ricksecker's perfumery received silver honors *ahead of French competitors*. He received further honors at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.





American perfumery is not new. Yet if we refuse to look for our own history, we'll allow modern perfumery's rank as an operative of the colonial state apparatus to go unchecked.




What is American perfumery?, I ask myself again. Too often, I fear, it's a perfumery of the state.

You'd be correct to presume I have reservations about the current state of American perfumery. But I remain optimistic. By its very nature, perfume is unstable, fully accepting of and completely un-resistant to






change. For my part, I learned to make perfume in order to reconsider what we talk about when we talk about perfume. I've attempted doing so here.

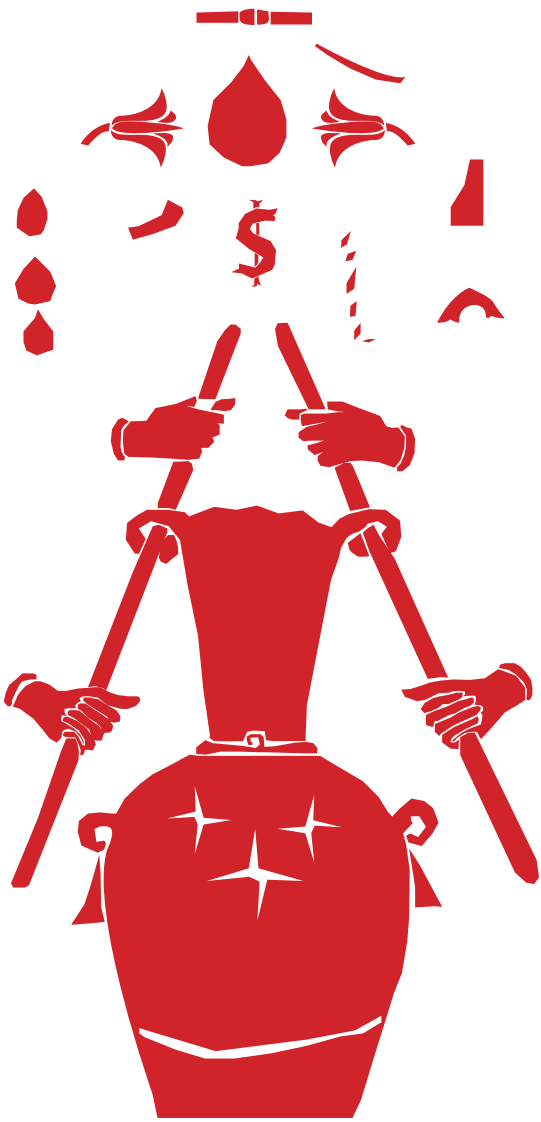




Perfume, you see, hasn't always manifested as olfactive taxidermy. This is an ancient craft that has been passed down from generation to generation by people like you and me, people who care about it, who engage with it and who make it. It has a long, long history of outlasting states. No doubt it will outlast ours.




Knowing this, we are beyond time to decolonize it: No state can stop us from making perfume about ourselves, finally.

Or, more accurately, again.






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Apisi Casper of **stinkypuppress** (Illinois), a small, queer indigenous-run press printed this project.

Studio Series 10





Studio Series 10

